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SUBJECT: U.S.-SAUDI ARABIA STRATEGIC DIALOGUE HUMAN  
DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP MEETS WITH MAJLIS AL SHOURA

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The U.S. delegation to the U.S. - Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue's Human Development Working Group (HDWG), led by Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS), Near East Affairs (NEA), Scott Carpenter, met with representatives of the Majlis Al Shoura on December 4, 2006. Secretary General Dr. Saleh Al Malik noted that the Council had formed a committee to study a bill initiated by the Cabinet regarding non-governmental organizations. Council members expressed concern regarding difficulties in obtaining U.S. visas, and Al Malik said the U.S. is losing ground on the commercial and investment fronts because of these difficulties. Al Malik noted that as a result of the King's push for reform, the Council has amended many laws. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles noted efforts to implement exchanges and outlined a proposal by the National Conference of State Legislatures. In a follow-up meeting with Al Malik on December 5, Carpenter and Barks-Ruggles encouraged Shoura Council members to visit various legislative bodies in the United States. Al Malik responded affirmatively, requesting assistance in establishing a research service in the Kingdom. Al Malik also noted that the SAG is currently looking for available dates for the President of the Council to visit the U.S. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The U.S. delegation to the U.S. - Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue's Human Development Working Group (HDWG) met with representatives of the Majlis Al Shoura on December 5, 2006. Secretary General Dr. Saleh Al Malik opened the discussion by noting that of 150 Council members, approximately 100 have doctoral degrees from western universities -- including the U.S. He described the Council's mandate, noting that Shoura means "consultative." Al Malik pointed out that the Council lost some of its authority in 1953 with the formation of the Cabinet, but regained that authority when the Council was reformed in ¶1993. He continued that Article 23 of the Law of the Shoura Council was recently amended to give the Council the authority to initiate and write laws. Al Malik noted that the Council, which has 12 standing committees, has initiated six or seven laws and amended many more -- primarily due to the King's push to modernize. The Council is also responsible for developing five-year plans and drafting annual reports.

¶3. (C) In response to DAS Carpenter's questions about the draft bill on non-governmental organizations, Al Malik explained that this bill was initiated by the Cabinet and forwarded to the Council approximately one year ago. The Council discussed the bill, but determined that it was

inadequate and formed a committee to study it and develop recommendations. Al Malik explained that this is a very sensitive issue and the Council has sought input from all stakeholders. He also pointed out that "evolution and gradualism" are societal values and pivotal in the Council's approach to its work.

¶4. (C) Council members expressed concern regarding difficulties in obtaining U.S. visas and the length of time necessary to process them. Al Malik noted that the U.S. is losing ground on the commercial and investment fronts because of the difficulties in securing visas, claiming that the terms and structure of trade will significantly change in the next five years. He said that none of Saudi Arabia's big development projects have gone to U.S. companies, insisting that it will be impossible to regain this loss ground. Another Council member suggested that U.S. security announcements have also negatively impacted commerce, stating that other countries' security advisories have been more carefully tailored.

¶5. (C) DCM noted that the implementation of on-line application and automated payment processes have improved the overall process, adding that Post anticipates processing over 50,000 non-immigrant visa applications by year's end. He noted the approximately 11,000 student visa applications processed this year and requested a consolidated list of scholarship recipients to help expedite the processing of those visa applications. (NOTE: Post has since received this list. END NOTE.) DCM stated that the duration of both student and business visas is reciprocal to the duration of Saudi visas in these categories. He pointed out that extending the duration of Saudi visas for U.S. students and businesspersons would allow the U.S. to do the same. CG Jeddah explained the security constraints preventing the Consulate from re-instating its visa operations, to which the Council offered its assistance in resolving these issues.

¶6. (C) Barks-Ruggles noted efforts to implement exchanges, discussing a proposal by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) to develop such connections. In response to questions regarding detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Barks-Ruggles reiterated the President's statements that the long-term goal is to reduce the number of detainees and close the facility. She stated that the policy is to prosecute or return detainees, unless -- as was the case of six Chinese Muslims who were resettled in Albania -- it is likely that returnees will face persecution.

¶7. (C) In response to Senior Advisor Laura Lederer's request for clarification on the draft criminal statute on trafficking in persons, Council members noted that there are six million foreign workers in the Kingdom. Most of the complaints, they insisted, are from domestic workers and number only 500, and the Domestic Workers Committee is working hard to address these issues.

¶8. (C) Carpenter and Barks-Ruggles followed up with Al Malik at his office on December 5, encouraging the Secretary General to visit various legislative bodies in the United States, including Congress, state legislatures, the Congressional Research Service, and the Census Bureau. The Secretary General responded affirmatively, requesting

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assistance in establishing a research service in the Kingdom.

He also noted the positive impact that the Library of Congress had on a Shoura Council delegation to the U.S. several months earlier. All parties agreed that there is a need for increased people-to-people engagement between Saudi Arabia and the United States. They noted that exchange programs such as those discussed would encourage these relationships. The Secretary General ended the meeting stating that the SAG is currently looking for available dates for the President of the Shoura Council to visit the U.S.

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